

## **AAP News Story**

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By Janelle Miles, National Medical Correspondent

Rene Rivkin had a lonely death but as one of the 10 per cent of bipolar disorder sufferers who take their own lives, he was not alone. The mood disorder, usually characterised by a person having high highs and low lows, is estimated to affect up to 600,000 Australian adults.

Experts believe numbers are on the rise, possibly because of changes in diet or as a consequence of increased illicit drug use. Other high-profile Australians who have been diagnosed with the condition include Olympic swimming star of the 50s and 60s John Konrads and former Wallaby prop Enrique "Topo" Rodriguez. One-time British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill was also a sufferer, famously naming his depression the "Black Dog". Psychiatrist Gordon Parker, director of Sydney's Black Dog Institute, described the lows associated with bipolar disorder as "one of the most horrible things you can experience".

"What people will say is: 'I've lost the colours in life, everything seems black, there seems to be no hope, everything is futile, life is without meaning'," Professor Parker said. "They'll say: 'I feel so lacking in energy that I find it even difficult to get out of bed and have a bath. I can't get to work or if I get to work, I just can't concentrate'. This paralysis that they get is dreadful. The time that you worry about them the most is when they're coming out of that paralysis, just getting a little bit of energy, because they get enough energy to then kill themselves."

Konrads, whose bipolar disorder has been brought under control with medication, said he was saddened Rivkin's life had to end the way it did, given modern

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medicine could treat the problem. "Even if he wanted to do it and wanted to find peace, I believe with the right treatment, he would have been able to find that," the 62-year-old said. "Despite his wrong doings, he always did a hell of a lot of right. I can remember him coming to Dawn Fraser's testimonial years ago and kicking in a hell of a lot of dough for an object that was on auction there because Dawn Fraser was in strife at the time."

Prof Parker said bipolar disorder could be effectively treated with mood stabilising drugs and anti-depressants. But he said many general practitioners had been poorly trained in detecting the condition and on average, sufferers waited between 15 and 20 years to be diagnosed. "Most people can expect that their moods will be brought under control or largely under control," Prof Parker said. "The difficulty is that you can't tell as a clinician, which drug is going to be the best for any particular person. Because it's an oscillating disorder, it will usually take months and sometimes longer before you can pull the whole thing together. You have to say to the patient at the front-end, that this is very treatable but it's going to take us a while to get there. As the medication bites and people learn strategies for staying well and they start to then learn how to control the disorder, it becomes reasonably smooth. But that can take years."

Although Prof Parker couldn't comment on Mr Rivkin's case, he said personal pressures on top of the bipolar disorder could increase the risk of a person taking their own life. Mr Rivkin had recently split from his wife of 32 years, Gayle. "The condition in and of itself will cause people to kill themselves," Prof Parker said. "The risk of suicide for the condition is 10 per cent. If, in addition to the bipolar they have a range of pressures which may have been brought about by the condition, that makes suicide even more likely."

"Topo" Rodriguez said that tragically, Mr Rivkin's death would probably be the best form of publicity to promote awareness of the disorder which involves a chemical imbalance in the brain and is often inherited. "I believe we still have a

lot of people that refuse to accept something like bipolar exists," he said. Konrads said more needed to be done to help society come to grips with mental disorders. "You think of a kid diagnosed with diabetes, they're on insulin for the rest of their lives. There's nothing wrong with that. Yet there seems to be something wrong with mental disorders," he said. "When we're depressed we blame ourselves. We just keep on making the whole problem worse by feeling guilty. I think once the feeling of guilt and fault comes out of it, people are more inclined to go to a doctor."

Prof Parker said people who suspect they may have bipolar disorder could anonymously take a self-assessment test on his institute's website at [www.blackdoginstitute.org.au](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au).

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